



THE VENERABLE YEWS  
OF  
BETTWS  
NEWYDD

## A BIT OF BIOLOGY

The Yew is a native British evergreen conifer, and bears male and female flowers on separate trees. Only female trees produce the seeds, which are surrounded by a bright red fleshy aril (like a berry but with an open end). This fleshy part is the only part of the yew that is not poisonous and provides food for birds.



Yew has long been used medicinally. In Roman times it was used as an antidote to adder bites and currently it is used to produce the drug Taxol for treatment of cancer.

*Taxus baccata*, the scientific name, may be derived from the Greek *toxicon*, meaning poisonous,

or from the Greek *toxon*, a bow and *baccata* from the Latin meaning berry.

Ref 'Yew a History' by Fred Hageneder.

## LOCATION



Our grateful thanks to the following who through their time and financial commitment made this leaflet possible:

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Further information:  
*Yew a History* by Fred Hageneder  
[www.ancient-yew.org](http://www.ancient-yew.org)





**W**e have three significant yew trees in our churchyard; each is over 20 feet in girth, which indicates they have all been growing here for over 1000 years. Each one illustrates the tenacity and regenerative ability of yew.

The largest one, with an impressive girth of over 30 feet, is believed to be over 2000 years old – one of the oldest living things in Monmouthshire. If you peer into the hollow centre of the tree you can see a new internal stem growing up the centre and becoming a new trunk thereby completely regenerating the ancient tree.



The yew growing near the boundary wall also illustrates this remarkable power of regeneration. The lower branches have spread wide and on touching the ground have taken root, or layered, this not only adds stability to the tree but also regenerates it as each rooted branch (layer) forms an independent tree.



The third yew is found behind the church, its trunk is hollowing, a feature common to all ancient yews. Hollow trees are less susceptible to high winds than solid trees and as the interior decays, new growth is triggered on the trunk. This new growth is usually of a curvy, flowing nature. Return and look at our oldest tree to see a stunning example of this and a reminder of why yew wood is sought after by wood turners.



## WHY ARE ANCIENT YEWS IN CHURCHYARDS?

### Theories abound:

*Yew makes best longbows – magic combination of sapwood and heartwood. Saved from felling as longbow wood, during 15th Century, due to Christian protests against using trees from consecrated ground for military purposes.*

*Christian Symbolism – Yew with its evergreen leaves and remarkable powers of regeneration has been used to symbolise the resurrection, continuity of life and constancy in faith.*

*There is an old custom for mourners to tuck a sprig of yew into the shroud or lay yew boughs beneath the coffin in the grave.*

*In the middle ages a female yew tree was used as the 'paradise tree' in plays about Adam and Eve, and the 'fruit' were ready for 24th December.*

*the religious feast day of Adam and Eve. This was acted out in churchyards to educate the mainly illiterate audience.*

*Practical use – planted to provide shelter for church and people.*

*Yew boughs were used for Palm Sunday processions as a substitute for palm fronds.*

*Some Yews predate the church building and our oldest yew predates Christianity. The Celts revered nature and trees. Was the church built on a site previously used for pagan worship?*

*Were severed heads of sacrificial victims once hung on our yew?*

